

# Twister: Ken Kesey's Multimedia Theatre

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In 1993, following a Grateful Dead concert in Eugene, Oregon, Ken Kesey held the world premiere of *Twister: A Ritual Reality in Four Quarters Plus Overtime If Necessary* at the National Guard Armory. A play structured loosely around the characters from L. Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz*, since its inception *Twister* has seen manifestations and utilized technologies in a wide variety of media, including text, costuming, music, lighting, lasers, projection of puppet silhouettes, still and video images, pyrotechnics, hypermedia, e-mail, and computerized edited video. In the play each of the major characters faces turn-of-the-twenty-first-century crises in the world today: The Hungry Wind, The Lonely Virus, and The Restless Earth, which deal, respectively, with tornadoes and hurricanes that bring famine, AIDS and other plagues, and earthquakes, all of which Kesey cites as being on the rise. Kesey is trying to revolutionize theatre through the co-opting of ritual, and, through the use of new technologies he hopes to re-encode the customs of theatre within which *Twister* is invariably presented. For Kesey, theatre is neither solely ritual nor completely drama in a traditional sense: he unerringly challenges the view of theatre's obsolescence and brings forth a critical element to today's new communication channels (Kesey, personal interview). Kesey's use of technology attempts to create a dramatic arena never seen before and actually redefines the boundaries between drama and new textualities as the vanguard of contemporary cultural politics.

*Twister* is Kesey's most recent publication, a theatrical play, his first ever published, released by Key-Z Productions as a set containing the ninety-nine-page text and a two-hour video of the play that Kesey spent four years editing from footage of the fifteen performances he produced between August 1993 and September 1997.<sup>1</sup> During Kesey's Acid Test period, a four-year span in which he developed a series of early performance art experiments, he performed with a group of friends who called themselves the Merry Pranksters.

The cast of *Twister* includes Kesey himself as Oz, Merry Pranksters Ken Babbs as both Thor and Frankenstein and George Walker as the Tinman, as well as occasional appearances by figures such as Allen Ginsberg as Rabbi Judah Buddha Whitman and Huey Lewis as Elvis.<sup>2</sup> Essentially a rock musical, with a score performed by Jambay, *Twister* employs a great deal of technical gadgetry in its production, much of which Kesey and the Pranksters developed in the 1960s. Some of the evolution of *Twister* and its reception by audiences has been in the realm of new media, including a Web page, e-mail, and video. The final video product was edited over a four-year period on computers originally lent to Kesey by George Lucas, director and producer of the *Star Wars* films.

In the introduction to the text of *Twister*, which is also posted on Kesey's Web page, Kesey discusses some of the experiences that inspired him to produce the play.<sup>3</sup> He says he "began to notice something different in some of the faces on the evening news, in particular the faces of disaster victims" (2). Disasters are for Kesey spaces of high drama. He describes people coming together when confronted with adversity in storms, and floods, and earthquakes: "strong faces of all colors, ages, and castes, all united in a mutual effort." What Kesey finds in these faces is an expression of "Strength and Sanity" in the face of disaster (3). He goes on to describe a journey to tornado-torn Fort Wayne, Texas, with writer friend Larry McMurtry, in which they drive to see "the devastation a twister can leave" (6). The devastation is a woundedness in the survivors of natural catastrophes. Kesey describes a town in which the people are overwhelmed by the disaster and occasionally unable to rise to the challenge of survival. He says, "It had been months since the tornado but the citizens were still dizzy. Divorces had doubled; crime was down by a half. Pregnancies were soaring and so were suicides" (7). The tornado apparently disorients people in such a way that their priorities become radically altered. Kesey says that despite the disorientation of the citizenry, their voices expressed "sanity and strength – and dignity" (8) – all the elements necessary for survival. Ultimately, *Twister* promotes flexibility and adaptability, compassion, and hope as responses to world problems. These are not actual solutions to any of the problems explored in the play; there is no call for an end to the destruction of rain forests, no cry for a cure for AIDS, but, rather, actions of honour with which to get through difficult times. At the very end of the *Twister* video, Jambay sings, "Hard times need strong rituals." *Twister* attempts to be a strong ritual that will evoke strength, sanity, and dignity for people to survive difficulties.

*Twister* is an example of postmodern drama that, as we have seen, employs modern technology to create a complex technical stage environment. *Twister* also illustrates a highly literary postmodernism in its text. One of the major influences on the concept of *Twister* is the 1986 BBC production of Dennis Potter's *The Singing Detective* (Kesey, personal interview). In *The Singing*

*Detective*, the postmodern cutting and fading between fictional worlds, real-time experience, hallucinations, and memories is all channelled through the point-of-view character. In *Twister* there are multiple levels present, but no central character through whom we have these worlds interpreted. Dorothy is the closest thing to a main character in the play, but we do not really see the action of the play through her eyes.

The text of *Twister*, initially written by Kesey, was revised heavily by the collective group of actors in the process of rehearsals, both at Kesey's home and at theatrical venues on the road. *Twister*'s costuming is elaborate and professional in appearance; especially good is George Walker's Tinman, complete with a lighted and beating heart, a quart of gear oil suspended above his shoulder like a plasma cannister, and smoke puffing up from his funnel hat. The stage lighting is complex in that it had to consider the multiple projections of the puppet silhouettes of the talking crows, still images, and video images, all of which requires its own projector and thus its own space on the scrim backdrop. Each of the three types of projections requires its own station backstage, which caused some extremely crowded situations at different venues on the road. The liquid crystal video projector used was originally lent to Kesey by filmmaker Gus Van Sant (*Drugstore Cowboy*; *My Own Private Idaho*; *Good Will Hunting*). The play also makes use of a laser, at one point, to introduce the Angel Gloria.

The pyrotechnics employed in the play are primarily used for Thor's weather map; a large sheet of metal connected to an electrical battery. Thor explains the world's increase of extreme weather patterns, using a steel rod as a pointer. When the rod comes into contact with the map, sparks fly. Attached to the map are various firecrackers, sparklers, and pinwheels, which Thor sets off by immersing them in enough sparks from the pointer. A flash bomb is used for the appearance of Dorothy behind the scrim backdrop in the first act, and green smoke is employed in association with the Wizard of Oz himself.

All of the technology described thus far – the music, lights, flashing images, and crackling fire – works to overwhelm the senses of the audience. The overthrow of the senses is a technique Kesey employs in order to give the ritualistic aspects of the play the greatest possible impact upon the audience. Bertolt Brecht identified two impulses in modern Epic drama – one to amuse, the other to instruct (130); *Twister* attempts to do both, and, through a polysemous contextualization, to be of epic proportions. One reason that Kesey chose to produce a play rather than write a novel of *Twister* was to take advantage of the immediacy of amusement and instruction inherent in the dramatic form. Brecht wrote of Piscator's experiments with theatre that they "began by causing complete theatrical chaos" (130). Kesey, sensing this about the modern stage, though probably not specifically instructed by Brecht's writings, suggests that the synthesis of responses to the "end times" before us should be that "[i]t has to be chaotic" (*Twister* 86). Thus the play ends with a cacophony

of all the musical numbers from the play being performed simultaneously, in order to symbolize a positive, assertive political chaos.

One of the essential elements of *Twister* is that it attempts to break beyond theatre and into ritual. Kesey has said that

[m]agic is seeing something that extends beyond the visible.... Ritual is necessary for us to know anything.... A ritual has to be a little dangerous.... The rituals we are trying to put together, we don't know what they are, but we feel the hunger for them ... Everywhere I go, I feel the hunger for people wanting to be a part of a ritual. (Interview with Rick and Fenex)

Kesey is trying to revolutionize theatre by co-opting ritual. Part of the ritual magic he tries to create is through the chaotic overwhelming of the senses, much as a tribal feeling among the participants of the Acid Tests would be achieved by overwhelming the senses through the use of drugs. Kesey is not the first writer to attempt this, though he is one of very few contemporary novelists who have turned to writing for the stage. The theatre of the absurd, the theatre of cruelty, the plays of Bertolt Brecht, and even Shakespeare's dramatic works – in fact, any theatre of importance in the last 400 years – has tried to co-opt ritual in order to revolutionize theatre. And, naturally, Western theatre comes out of a classical Greek tradition in which ritual and theatre were indivisibly linked. According to J.L. Styan, Jean Genet's ritual theatre adopted and altered forms so “that his stage should mirror the true reality, and tried to dissolve the aesthetic barrier which separates play and audience by shaking the very supports that make it work, its conventions” (156). Kesey's technique for shaking up the theatrical supports in *Twister* is less symbolic than Genet's, more direct, because Kesey actually wants the house and the stage to become one. This unification is not always achieved, since the environment within which *Twister* is invariably presented places the audience inexplicably into theatre's coded world from the moment of entering the theatre or purchasing a ticket; this is on a discursive peak very distant from that of any ritual with which the audience can identify. Until *Twister* can be performed in a venue where the stage literally descends to the level of the gallery, eliminating the physical distinction between stage and audience, most audiences will continue to remain in their seats.

Just as Kesey's initial interest in performance art in the 1960s was conceived as a response to what he called “material madness,” *Twister* tries to be politically instructive in an overly commodified culture, outside traditionally ritualistic environments like churches or movie theatres. At the climax of the play, the Angel Gloria appears on stage, and her first words are “Be amazed” (89). It is amazement that seals lessons in Kesey's theatre, and it is this kind of magic amazement that Kesey sees as being at the peak of performance art. Kesey's need to perform fills a void he felt in publishing novels, where the

feedback is slanted mostly through critics. In order to maximize his interaction with the audience, his theatre demands their participation.

One of the ways in which the play attempted to seed the audience with participants was through education on Kesey's Web page. As people began to read about the play in advance of attending a performance, theatregoers began e-mailing Kesey, volunteering to participate. There are three specific roles written into the script for these recruits, one for each of the three acts: Spinners (dancers), Shouters (singers), and Boomers (drummers). On 24 March 1998, when asked about the success of involving audiences of *Twister* in participating over the course of the fifteen performances of the play, Kesey wrote, "With every show [of *Twister*] the audience got more and more into it [being part of the play]. We got better at luring them in, but I think it was the E-mail that made the difference. We were reachin' them and teachin' 'em" (e-mail). The presence of audience members who were instantly willing to stand up and participate in the drama helped to encourage a greater number of spectators to walk up on stage when invited, towards the end of the play, by Oz. In the video, there are moments not in the text when characters directly address the audience in engagement; for example, Dorothy says "Get into it, guys" when the audience fails to "get" or respond to a joke. This kind of direct confrontation is designed to shake the audience out of their complacency.

Called a "Ritual Reality," *Twister* plays upon an ever-changing possibility of what the play virtually is. The projected video at the opening of the play includes footage of the actors backstage and outside the theatre, presenting the actors themselves as characters playing characters. The actors are famous people, to varying degrees, so their presentation in the video represents a scale of persona from, for instance, Kesey as self, to Kesey as counterculture hero, to Kesey as actor, to Kesey as character. Some of the preliminary images are of Kesey and other actors and famous personalities outside the play, such as Mountain Girl,<sup>4</sup> on the bus, which brings in a whole other counterculture context. Just as the play tries to bring the audience into the play, it also tries to bring itself into the "real world." At one point in the playtext, Kesey himself, who plays Oz, speaks as himself, playing with the distinction between character, actor, and author. The video images at the end of the play include a medley of footage from Kesey ventures outside of *Twister*, including a bonfire night at Kesey's farm as early as 1989, the 1992 Field Trip, and the 1994 Hog Farm pig-nic with Timothy Leary and Wavy Gravy, as well as a string of cultural icons ranging from Hells Angels and Mad Max to geishas and old "Biddies" (95-96). Dorothy is played by an unknown actress who, in the text, refers to her four abortions; in an obvious reference to Judy Garland, who played Dorothy in the Hollywood film, Oz refers to her drinking problems (22-23).

The play makes reference to many cultural icons and figures, among them Rush Limbaugh, Pat Robertson, Jim Morrison, John Dillinger, Archie Bunker,

O.J. Simpson, the Grateful Dead, Republicans, soap operas, Beautyrest, Samsonite, Nike, Birkenstocks, Prozac, Madison Square Garden, the Smithsonian Institute, the Department of Environmental Quality, Waco's Branch Davidians, FedEx, and Bosnia. The Borg from *Star Trek: The Next Generation* are referred to three times during the play. The science-fictionized flavour of the entire play complicates the action because, unlike the *Wizard of Oz* film, the play explains no envelope of objective reality. In a sense, the video clips from the beginning and end of the play that include the actors in other contexts make objective reality itself the envelope. The shotgun effect of the cultural references creates a commercial media environment in which the audience has tuned in to a band where all stations seem to converge. The first act opens and closes with the image of the television colour bars test pattern, making the play, on one level, a television broadcast.

*Twister* is made deceptively subtle by weaving between the positions of ritual and virtual reality. The contexts in which the play refers to itself include an ever-changing range from the original *Wizard of Oz* film to an *Oz* sequel, a theatre, a television station called OZTV, a hospital, a sports arena, an airport, a university classroom, a computer virtual reality, and "reality" itself.

The first instance of postmodern self-reflexivity occurs when Oz tells Dorothy that "We have quite an impressive line-up waiting in the wings to assist you tonight" (20). This comment reinforces the theatricality of the play. Much later, Dorothy breaks up a fight between Frankenstein and Elvis by saying, "You can butt heads later backstage" (84). A third of the way through the play, Dorothy addresses the audience directly, a postmodern trope that has its roots in the habits of Shakespeare and some of his predecessors, but which is distinct from Renaissance drama: "We're all persuaded, right? (*she leads the audience*)" (37). Here Dorothy reinforces the stage presence of the play, whereas earlier she has textualized the setting: "I don't think I was shanghaied into this script to solve your inner-city situation" (35). Here the action is rhetorically shifted, literally, "into" the text itself, so that the play is virtually taking place on the page, though it is as likely to be viewed on stage or in video format as it is to be read. At the same time, by using contemporary urban language, Kesey invokes the political aspects of the real world.

One of the most effective and quick blurrings of these contexts, or levels, in which the play is working occurs when the Tinman explains his dilemma: "No, it was my heart, my foolish heart. It loves not wisely but too much. And too many. Then again it might have come in through my modem - I network a lot. And I have shared my oilcan a time or two" (52). Like the Scarecrow, who says earlier in the play that he should have asked Oz for a mind instead of a brain (35), the Tinman has a heart, but, like most hearts, it is unwise. In obvious reference to AIDS, which is named only once in the play, the Tinman's language takes the audience quickly through a romantic/sexual context, to a virtual-reality computer context (in which the virus the Tinman has is an electronic one), to an implied academic/business world networked social virus (such as



Legionnaires' Disease, years ago), to drugs (the shared oilcan symbolizing, obviously, shared hypodermic needles). This effective mixing of metaphoric contexts is one of the most literarily interesting elements of the play.

The character Legba, the African god of rhythm, says he joins the play because he was "clicking through the channels, y'know, when I click across this flick" (61). Here the play becomes itself a process of channel surfing, with the myriad media images inserted in the video images projected on screen and the verbal invocation of cultural icons as media bites in a televised context. Dorothy refers to herself as a kind of Gibsonesque cyborg<sup>5</sup> or a computer game character when she berates Oz for her situation in the play:

You drag me out of a warm bed and toss me in this snake-pit without so much as even a pardon me ma'am, and then you blindside my dog with a cheap fiddle then you down-load my memory with enough nightmares to last me the sleep of eternity. (70)

Toto has been genetically altered, in the play's initial tornado sequence, so that he is a hybrid between a dog and a violin. Dorothy's downloaded memory infuses all reality in the play with the potential for virtuality.

Poking fun at so many things, and so much aware of its own textuality, as we have seen, *Twister* does not fail to include poststructuralist theory in its cultural critique. Near the end of the play, Dorothy says, "It's time we deconstructed this Crazy Carousal, don't you think?" (82). In this way the play itself is also inviting criticism from the "real world," as well as criticizing itself.

The weakest part of the play is the story the narrator tells about King Otto the Bloody of Germany at the turn of the year AD 1000.<sup>6</sup> Elsewhere in the play there are chilling moments of technical surprise, as when Dorothy first sees the enormous faces of Oz and Glenda projected on the scrim backdrop, for example, or the beginning of Act Three, which starts with the sealing of a coffin, seen from the inside. The play uses humour often, and, though often the humour falls flat, it is also infectious, as the particular frames of reference are constructed through the play's process. The tone of the play grows on its audience. Although it will probably not seem funny out of context, the part that made me laugh out loud while reading the play came when Dorothy tries to guess what the Tinman's mumbled "Own a long" means: "A longboat for a quick escape? Am I getting warm? A longbow? The long arm of the law? A longlegged long pig from Long Island?" (58). This wordplay is what Kesey uses both most and least effectively. The best musical number is the Z to A litany of viruses running rampant in the world today, delivered in Act Two by Glenda and the Tinman to the tune of "If I Only Had a Brain." There is also a humorous dance routine with Dorothy and Frankenstein in Act Three.

The world premiere of the video film of *Twister* was presented in Springfield, Oregon, on 11 April 1998.

## NOTES

- 1 *Twister* was intended for publication by Penguin, but the author and the publishing company had a falling-out. Instead, Kesey's son, Zane, has published it, and it is available online from <<http://www.key-z.com/>>.
- 2 There is some confusion concerning Lewis's performance in *Twister*. He played the part of Elvis in the first production of the play in 1993, despite being listed as playing "himself." Simon Babbs played Elvis in subsequent performances of the play.
- 3 References to Kesey's introduction to *Twister* are to the printed version.
- 4 Mountain Girl, a.k.a. Carolyn Adams, joined the Merry Pranksters in 1964. Becoming Kesey's lover, she gave birth to their daughter, Sunshine, in 1966. Mountain Girl was later married to Grateful Dead guitarist Jerry Garcia for more than a decade. In 1996, after Garcia's death, she moved to Eugene, Oregon, where she lives today.
- 5 William Gibson is commonly considered the founder of a branch of science fiction writing known as "cyber punk," which takes as one of its main themes the manipulation of human and animal biology through technological means. Gibson's novels include *Neuromancer*, *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, *Johnny Mnemonic*, and *All Tomorrow's Parties*.
- 6 Kesey published this section in the *New Yorker* as "Otto the Bloody."

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